# THE CONDUCT OF LIFE

# IN WESTERN AND EASTERN PHILOSOPHY

SPRING 2022

FAS GENED 1128

LAW – 2392

HDS – 2313

THURSDAYS 9:30-11:30AM

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**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

A study of approaches in the philosophical traditions of the West and the East to the conduct of life. Philosophical ethics has often been understood as meta-ethics: the development of a method of moral inquiry or justification. Here we focus instead on what philosophy has to tell us about the first-order question: How should we live our lives?

This year a major concern will be the study and contrast of two such orientations to existence. One is the philosophical tradition focused on ideas of self-reliance, self-construction, and [nonconformity](https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C5CHFA_enUS814US814&q=nonconformity&spell=1&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjKieLYvfLeAhVBMt8KHSjEBOwQkeECCCkoAA) (exemplified by Emerson and Nietzsche). The other is a way of thinking (notably represented by Confucius) that puts its hope in a dynamic of mutual responsibility, shaped by role and ritual and informed by imaginative empathy.

No prerequisites other than a willingness to consider a wide range of problems and materials.

Extended take-home examination.

**CLASS SEQUENCE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS**

**FROM META-ETHICS TO ETHICS**

**January 27**: Themes and agenda of the course

**February 3:** The school philosophy - meta-ethics: Kantian, consequentialist, and social-contract theories.

Derek Parfit, “Summary of Meta-Ethical Theories” from *On What Matters,* vol. I, pp. 14-28 (course website)

**THE CONDUCT OF LIFE GROUNDED IN THEOLOGICAL OR METAPHYSICAL ASSUMPTIONS**

**February 10**: Love and infinity: The Christian approach to the conduct of life. Hegel, "The Moral Teaching of Jesus: (pp. 224-253) and "Love" (pp. 302-308) from *Early Theological Writings* (course website). Karl Barth, from *Epistle to the Romans,* pp. 48-54 (course website)

Karl Rahner, from "On the Theology of Hope" and "The Christian Future of Man" (course website)

RMU, the doctrine of the virtues reconsidered from *The Religion of the Future,*

pp. 366-387

**February 17:** Overcoming the will and moving toward universal compassion: world rejection and universal compassion in the teaching of Buddha

*Sources of Indian Tradition,* vol. I, pp. 29-40, 93-124, 153-187 (course website)

**February 24:** Overcoming the will and living without illusion.

Schopenhauer *The World as Will and Representation,* vol. I, prefaces to the first and second editions, and sections 53, 57, 58, 59, 68, 69 (vol I to be acquired)

from vol. II, section XLIX, "The Road to Salvation," (course website)

**ETHICS WITHOUT THEOLOGICAL OR METAPHYSICAL FOUNDATIONS: A LIVING CONTEST OF MORAL VISIONS**

**March 3:** The ethic of self-construction and non-conformity: Emerson and Nietzsche

Emerson, "Self-Reliance" from *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*

Nietzsche, "First essay: 'Good' and 'Evil', 'Good' and 'Bad' from *On the Genealogy of Morals*

**March 10:** The future of the ethic of self-construction and non-conformity: contrasting visions.

Simon May, "The New Ideal: To become what one is" from *Nietzsche's Ethics and his War on Morality*, pp. 104-134 (course website)

RMU, "The Conduct of Life" from *The Religion of the Future,* pp. 341-366,

387-444

**March 17**: Spring recess

**March 24:** The ethic of connection: Confucius. Mutual responsibility and imaginative empathy in the teaching of Confucius: ritual, role, the meritocratic division of labor, solidarity, and the imagination of the other

Confucius, *Analects,* Mencius (excerpts, course website)

**March 31:** The future of the ethic of connection.

Émile Durkheim, from *The Divison of Labor in Society*, pp.174-199, 220-229,

329-350, 396-409

Michael Tomasello, from *A Natural History of Morality,* pp. 135-163

**April 7:** A synthesis of the ethics of self-fashioning and connection?

Robert Brandom, “The History of Normative Structures” from *A Spirit of*

*Trust: A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology*, pp. 469-499

**CONCLUSION: MORAL INSIGHT AND ITS LIMITS**

**April 14:** The political contexts and consequences of approaches to the conduct of life

**April 21:** Commitment and nihilism

**ASSIGNED BOOKS**

Many of the readings are drawn from six assigned books. All these books are paperbacks, available at the Harvard Coop and on Amazon. The remaining assigned readings will be posted on the course website. *The Religion of the Future* can also be downloaded for free from the website, robertounger.com.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays,* Dover

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Penguin

Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, Volume I,* Dover

Confucius, *Analects,* Penguin

Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *The Religion of the Future,* Verso

Note that in the class sequence below and in the readings assigned for each class there is no reference to *The Religion of the Future.* You should have read the following parts of this book, as background to the arguments of the course, by the class of **March 10**: chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, and 7. In addition, read the concluding section of Chapter 5, pp. 257-289.

**WRITING REQUIREMENTS**

During the semester undergraduates will write two brief papers. The first paper will be due in class on **February 24.** The second paper will be due electronically by **March 24**, 12 noon.

Each of these papers, on topics to be set, will respond to a major problem or idea discussed in the course up to that time. Each will be between 6 and 10 double-spaced pages long. Each will count for 20% of the final grade.

In lieu of a final examination, all students will write an extended take-home examination. This final paper or examination will provide them with an occasion to respond to a central aspect of the argument of the course. It should have a minimum of 15 and a maximum of 20 double-spaced pages. The topic or topics will be described in class on **March 24**. The final examination paper will be due by 4 p.m. on **Thursday, April 28** (no extensions). It will count for 50% of the final grade for undergraduates. 10% of the final grade for undergraduates will be attributed to participation in section.

The grade for all graduate students, including law students, will be based entirely on their final take-home examination, which will be for them the only writing requirement in the course.